

ORAL HISTORY TAPE

Number 1

INFORMANT – SHERMAN HENSLEY, MRS. WILLIE GIBBONS, LIGE GIBBONS

March 25, 1960

INTERVIEWER – HOBART G. CAWOOD, HISTORIAN

INT: I'd like to ask you how old you are today?

INF: Seventy-eight, I was seventy-eight the sixth day of the past November.

INT: Sixth day of the past November. When did you first go on the mountain to stay?

INF: To stay?

INT: Um-hum.

INF: Well, I was, said something to you about it the other evening, I believe I was, made a little bit of a mistake. I believe it was 1903 when I moved on the mountain.

INT: 1903, was anyone else living on the mountain when you got up there?

INF: Yes, there was.

INT: Who was that?

INF: John Nichols, had a lease there. He stayed there on a five-year lease till it run out. And old man Byrd a-marked the line where Nichols had the lease on, off the field there at Rosehill, Virginia.

INT: Um-hum. And there wasn't anyone else besides Nichols when you went up there?

INF: Yes, he had a son-in-law by the name of Bill Satterfield.

INT: Bill Satterfield.

INF: He lived there. Frank Connley, another son-in-law of John Nichols'...

INT: All there was living up there were kin to the Nichols'?

INF: Yeah, the old man Nichols and his family you might say. Son-in-laws and he had a bunch of boys at home, they wasn't married.

INT: Now when you went up there, did you go up by yourself or did several of you go up at the time you went up?

INF: Pretty close, along the same winter. Same winter and early spring.

INT: Did you all go up in a bunch and go together or did they come all scattered?

INF: No, different times moving in, when they got ready. Some of them had to build houses before they could move.

INT: Yeah, they built houses and then they moved in.

INF: Yeah.

INT: They built houses then they moved in.

INF: Yeah.

INT: Did everybody build their own house?

INF: No, there was some houses already built. I moved in one of them myself. And old man Ian Hensley, he moved in a house that was already built. And so did Feland Hensley.

INT: Were the – after you got up there and there was a need for other cabins, did everybody go together and help build the cabins or did the man that wanted the cabin build it himself?

INF: Well, they built them theirselves.

INT: We went to a house up there day before yesterday that was identified to me as your house, the old house, and when was that house built, do you have any idea.

INF: I don't exactly recollect. I got a girl that was born a day or two after we moved into that house, but I forgot her age. Let's see, how old did you say you was, we can get close?

INT: I'm forty-seven.

INF: You and her was the same age. Well then Shirley is two years younger than Herbert, makes forty-five. That was forty-five years ago when I moved in that house, now understand I lived in another house...

INT: Yeah, you lived in another house before that one.

INF: Yeah, I built that house.

INT: You built that one? When you went on the mountain, Mr. Hensley, was the land clear, or did you have to clear it?

INF: Oh, we had to clear most of it there was a little land cleared where these Nichols had a lease and cleared.

INT: Well, was it mostly briars and scrub trees or pretty big timber?

INF: Wild woods out in the, just like timber. Now there's a boundry there but Nichols cleared most of his off and those that hadn't had been deadened off by the colored people winding up the Civil War.

INT: Yeah, whereabouts was the Nichols' home up there? Whereabouts up there did they...?

INF: Well, they, you learned where I lived then?

INT: Yeah.

INF: Well, the other drain just right of there from here runs on up there farther into them fields. Well, that's where he lived in the upper house up that swag.

INT: He would have been farther up towards Sand Cave even from Willie Gibbons' house wouldn't he?

INF: Yes, yeah, Gibbons' house is back down yonder way from us. They and the old man Nichols' place is closer to the Sand Cave, they're east, Gibbons' place.

INT: Uh-huh. When you went up there, how did you make a living?

INF: Well, I went to clearing ground, farming. Raising some hogs. Pretty soon I got me some sheep, raise a few calves, cattle. I got a pretty good bunch of hogs, most all time along I'd have some hogs to sell. Work off from home, after I'd made my crop I'd have to work off some to get some money to buy the kids some clothes and shoes.

INT: What were your paying crops up there? What did you usually raise?

INF: Crops? Corn, potatoes, beans, vegetables, different kinds. Fine place for them, finest place ever I lived at.

INT: Mostly what you raised was what you consumed.

INF: We raised mostly what we used and consumed at home.

INT: How much cattle did you usually have? Did you usually have just three or four head or did you usually have a pretty good herd?

INF: No, I didn't have a pretty good herd, sometimes five or six or eight head or sometimes less.

INT: Most of them milk cows?

INF: Well, from two to four milk cows what I commonly kept, sometimes if I could get ahold of some more but I'd sell them. Sell off my calves sometimes, sometimes keep them till they're yearlings, sometimes buy a few calves and then sell and get a little profit.

INT: What were your main tools? Were they hand forged tools or did you go out and buy tools?

INF: We went out and bought most of our tools?

INT: I've heard from Lige Gibbons and some more of the people around that people used to make a little liquor up there, a little moonshine.

INF: I think they sure done that.

INT: He even said that couple of them made their living at it nearly. Was there quite a bit of liquor made on the mountain?

INF: Yes, there was a right smart of liquor made.

INT: Did they use their own grain?

INF: Well, part of the time they did and part of the time they'd go off and bought it.

INT: What kind of work did the women do around the house? Did they do the gardening or did the men do that?

INF: Well, yeah, they mostly did the gardening. Sewing and darning for the children and family. Keep house, cooking, milking....

INT: And the men, what were the men doing at this time?

INF: Well, when they got through with their crop at home most of them worked off where ever they could get a job. You know times was pretty close then, there wasn't much money in circulation and we had to work where ever we could get work.

INT: You mentioned that you had to come off the mountain and buy a few things. What were some of the things that you usually had to buy?

INF: Well, clothing and shoes for the children and flour and salt and one thing and another from the store.

INT: Your salt...

INF: Yeah, salt and soda and all such as people used in the house for cooking purposes.

INT: Did you, you say you bought most of your clothes, did you make any of your clothes?

INF: Yeah, made some of our clothes.

INT: Well, did you do any weaving up there, the women did any weaving?

INF: No, I don't believe there was any weaving done. I think that kind of cut out, some of the folks that moved there did weave and make cloth before they come up there. But after they come there they didn't weave any cloth I'm pretty sure.

INT: Where'd you come off to do most of your trading or buying?

INF: Well, I might just say most of it right here in Virginia.

INT: Um, come off on the Virginia side.

INF: And part of the time off the other way, the way you fellers say you came in yesterday, off the creek. I wouldn't hardly know which to say which place we did most of our trading.

INT: How often did you usually go off the mountain?

INF: Sometimes maybe once a week, sometimes maybe twice a week and sometimes maybe two weeks before we'd go off.

INT: Just when ever the necessity'd arise?

INF: Just when ever it was called for.

INT: Where did you get most of your mail, Mr. Hensley?

INF: Most of our mail, I guess we got most of our mail at Cubbage.

INT: Cubbage, on the Kentucky side.

INF: Either Cubbage or Ewing one. We got our mail right out here.

INT: You have to come off to get that too?

INF: Yeah, we had to come off to get that or go off the other way to get our mail.

INT: What kind of road did you have to get on and off the mountain?

INF: Well, as old timey people would call it, kind of a sled road, you know what I mean by...?

INT: Um-hum. Could you get a wagon up this road?

INF: Well, no, not to haul anything on it. It was too heavy for the mules to take them up full, have to take them up empty.

INT: Well, up on the top of the mountain, you had wagons to do your farming and all with?

INF: Year, we had wagons up there. Caning mills and blacksmith shop...

INT: Yeah, did a lot of your blacksmithing.

INF: ...two little water mills.

INT: We noticed the school house up there and we wondered when it was built, do you have any idea when that school house that's up there now was built?

INF: No, I can't give you the exact date.

INT: I understand that that school house was built fairly late and that there was another school house prior to that that sat right close to that one.

INF: Yes, that's right. Then old man Gibbons built this last one. I was trustee at that time of that little school up there but I can't give you the exact date.

INT: How many children were usually in school up there?

INF: Well, they'd run from in the teens a little to either thirty-seven or forty-seven, thirty seven I believe.

INT: Where'd your teachers come from, Mr. Hensley?

INF: Mostly from Kentucky. Two times got teachers from Virginia.

INT: Um-hum. Would they come in maybe on a Monday and spend during the whole week and then leave...?

INF: Yes, they'd-part of them would come in Monday morning, leave out Friday evening till next Monday again. Some of them boarded up there and didn't come off only maybe every two or three weeks.

INT: Now, this was under the Bell County, Kentucky school system?

INF: That's right.

INT: What was the largest number of people would you estimate that lived up there at any one time, combined, the whole outfit?

INF: I don't know, I'd like to think a little on that, I might have a little idea but I couldn't say...

INT: Well, just give us a little idea, if you would

INF: I'll have to think awhile and kind of think over the families.

INT: Okay.

INF: I'd say between fifty and sixty, somewhere along there, I'm confident they was that many.

INT: That would have been—about when would that have been, about 1925 in there?

INF: Somewhere in there I guess.

INT: Were most of the people who lived up there related to each other?

INF: Well, most of them was—most of them was. Two other people lived there that wasn't related to any of us.

INT: Well now there were several Gibbons, were these Gibbons intermarried with the Hensleys?

INF: Yes, old man Will Gibbons married a Hensley.

INT: And that's where the Gibbons come in—in relation to the Hensleys?

INF: That's where the Gibbons come in relation to the Hensley family.

INT: What was your wife's name, Mr. Hensley?

INF: Niceanne. (Nicey Ann – "G.R.O.")

INT: Niceanne. How many children did you have?

INF: Just nineteen.

INT: Nineteen, is that all? Were there any twins in that bunch?

INF: No.

INT: Not a twin. How many of them are still alive?

INF: Nine of them alive.

INT: Nine of them alive. Are any of them buried on the mountain up there?

INF: Yeah, all except one. It was when I was living on Walden's (Walling – "G.R.O.") Creek in Harlan County and she was buried over there. There's nine of the children buried up there and my wife.

INT: I saw your wife's grave up there. Her's is the one that has the stone that has her name on it, isn't it? Are there any other stones up there that have their names on them, we couldn't see much for the snow the other day?

INF: Seems like there was some of them that had names on them. Burt Gibbons he had a stone up there at one of his children's graves, I think it's got a name on it. Some of them's got names cut on them in that old rock.

INT: We couldn't see for the snow the other day, up above them, but we could see your wife's. How many graves are there in the cemetery up there, do you have any idea?

INF: I think it's thirty-seven.

INT: Thirty-seven.

INF: To the best of my recollection it is thirty-seven, somewhere in there, thirty-seven.

INT: Are most of the people that are buried up there people that lived up there?

INF: Yes...

INT: And probably died up there too?

INF: Yes, well they's lets see now—Mr. Delk (Jake Delph – “G.R.O.”) and his wife, they're buried there. He died down on Clear Fork, you know where Clear Fork is? He lived down there and died down there. But before that his wife had died and they lived on the north side of the Brush Mountain down there. Do you know anything about the old Hannah Wilson place? Well they lived out there and she died there and we brought her out there and buried her there. There wasn't no cemetery close around up there. Then later the Delks (Delphs) got off on Clear Fork, and the old man died down there and they brought him back up there and buried him by his wife. Jake Delk (Delph) and his wife (Elizabeth Hensley Delph – “G.R.O.”) is buried there, no relation to the other people that lived up there.

INT: Did you folks up there usually make the coffin and put them away yourself?

INF: Yeah, made the most of them.

INT: Mr. Hensley, I heard the other day that you'd killed an Indian on that mountain, is that--is there any truth in that?

INF: Well, yes, there's some truth in that.

INT: Would you tell us the story about that?

INF: I don't care to. It happened just like it happened and I've never told a lie about it yet and I don't aim to. I wouldn't say positive that it was an Indian, I guess it was a crossed up Indian, he had awful kinky hair. It was an Indian-Nigger crossed up. Well, I had a bunch of hogs strowed all down that mountain clear down to Gibbon's Gap. The time was Sunday when I went to look at them, take my dogs and rifle and go on and look at my hogs and kill me a mess of squirrels, groundhog or anything I could find. But that morning I wasn't intending to go to look about the hogs that day but there was a neighbor that lived up there by me, Barnett Thompson, B.A. Thompson, he come over pretty early and said, “What are you going to do today?” I said, “Nothing particular that I know of.” He had a hog he'd bought from Burt Hensley and it had got with my hogs and was running with them. He said, “I just thought if you were going down the mountain to look at your hogs I might go with you to see if you'd see anything of that one of mine.” Well, I said, “I could go when I get through feeding and eat breakfast.” “Well,” he said, “I'll go on back and when you get ready come on over by there and I'll go with you.” He said, “A while ago there come a woman in at my house, did you see any woman over in here?” “No, I didn't see no woman. I didn't see nobody.” “Well,” he said “There come a woman...it was foggy on the mountain and it was cold enough, getting toward spring, but it was cold enough that the hide froze on the timber...but she come to the door and called (he called his wife “Spud”) and Spud went to the door and she asked for something to eat. And Spud told her she didn't have nothing fixed but she was getting breakfast and to come in and wait till she got breakfast fixed. She said, no, she didn't have time. She took on back up toward the barn, the barn set on up behind the house. She went on up over the hill out of sight and I eased on up by the barn to see where she was going, there was a man with her and they was going out through the field, going down the mountain towards the Cumberland Gap. “I just wonder who it could be.” “Well,” I said, “I don't know who it could be, I ain't seen nobody.” So I went on after while and eat breakfast. We went on down the mountain path, people traveled a right smart then to

check their stock that lived off the mountain. We got into the woods when we could see their sign. We come under them trees the fog a falling off and thawing and we could see their sign as we went down. We went on down the other side, Yeller Slip Gap they call it. We seen these people on the other side on the top of the mountain that runs off the ridge that connects up with the mountain and then it goes off into Virginia. But right along the Gap it looks like the mountain do run off there. But they went off this ridge that led off into Virginia I reckon they seen they was wrong and they was making back to the top of the mountain. And we went on around the path to the south side of the mountain and they come off ahead of us up there. Got up close to the path as we come on up to them. The man spoke to us, I spoke to him, I didn't see any harm, no sir, I didn't see no harm. He eased on up taking a few steps up towards us, stopped, had some quilts around him three quilts, all rolled up and around his neck this away and come back over here and he had them under his arms and around his neck. He got on up pretty close to me, well it was four steps from where he's at and where I was. All of a sudden I seen him a-worming and a-squirming around like that, he was a getting those quilts so he could pull them off. All at once them quilts, I seen them just go, he just spread out like a bullfrog in there. His feet was up that high off the ground when he seen my gun. I had a single barrel shot gun laying on my left arm like that and a-holding to the bridge of it, I wasn't holding to it with my right hand at all. I wasn't thinking of trouble with the man but other fellers had had him arrested and he was suspicious of us with those guns and that's what made him do what he done. He just swung, he grabbed my shotgun barrel about that close to the muzzle I guess with his left hand. Well when he done that I grabbed with the other hand and I just roughly got ahold of the gun where a feller holds a gun there behind the lock and I jumped down the hill, it was on sliding ground, not too steep and we tussled around there on down the hill a little and I jerked the gun through his right hand. But he never did get a hold of it with his right hand, I was a-jerking him, finally I jerked it through his hand. Then I run I went jumping I was turned with my face to him and I didn't get turned to steady myself to run good cause I was trying to get away from him all I could. And he was right ready to make for my gun again and he was about to get me and I fired it off.

INT: And killed him.

INF: Hit him in the stomach there. Then he run me about twenty steps right down the hill and there's a big chestnut tree down to the left side and I just whirled right around to my right around that tree, he's about caught me and I seen he was going to catch me again. When I made that turn around that tree he kind of checked up but he kept right on straight down the hill about twenty steps and sat down on a rock.

INT: Where did you bury him?

INF: First buried him on the mountain but a feller came here from Oklahoma and got him he belonged there. He'd killed his wife and three children, killed two sheriffs and shot another one.

INT: He was kind of a rough feller to be tangled up with there in the mountain, wasn't he?

INF: Kind of unexpected. They'd shot him through the hip bone here and he was still running.

INT: He still had a wound them? Mr. Hensley, was there always plenty of game up there on the mountain?

INF: Oh, pretty plenty. Squirrels, coons, a few rabbits, possum. There used to be several wild turkey but it seemed like they just disappeared for some two years before I left up there.

INT: Do you think maybe the disappearance of the wild turkey happened sometime around the time of the chestnut blight.

INF: Yeah, somewhere around there. I know when they was there they was plenty of chestnuts and around the time of the timber dying and failing, they just finally just disappeared.

INT: Did you notice any other disappearance of game when the chestnuts went?

INF: Well, yes, they wasn't nigh as many coons nor squirrels neither after the chestnuts give out.

INT: We've heard that there might have been on this mountain at one time a red squirrel, did you ever see any red squirrel on this mountain? Now it's not a fox squirrel, it was about the size of the gray squirrel only it was red.

INF: No, I've killed the fox squirrels all around. I never did kill any of them little red squirrels, I heard talk of them but I never did see one of them.

INT: Were there several bear in the mountain?

INF: No, not several. Once in a while we'd see a bear sign or find out something about a bear in the mountains.

INT: Was there ever any fish in the streams up on the mountain?

INF: Well, there was some small-very small fish down in Martin's Fork, I'd say a mile and a half of us, over one mile.

INT: What kind were they?

INF: I don't any name for them. Never did catch one, bout as long as any ones I could see was about that long.

INT: About as long as your finger?

INF: Yeah, about as long as my finger. It was up in there above the Frank Gibbons old place, they's a pond there, a pot hole, there was a whole bunch of them in there and one fall it dried up and killed them.

INT: Was there a lot of snakes in the mountains?

INF: Oh, yes.

INT: Poisonous snakes?

INF: Yes, rattlesnakes and copperheads, that's the only kinds of poisonous snakes I know there and we had several of them.

INT: Did you have several of them...did you have any diamond-back rattlers or were they all timber rattlers?

INF: No, they was diamonds...

INT: Diamond-backs...

INF: ...Some of them was. Some of them was diamonds, right. I've killed them.

INT: Did anyone ever die from snakebite up there?

INF: No, not to my knowing. And I have heard it said but I never did ask none of them that some of them Nichols, it was before they lived up there at the Hensley Settlement, they lived first here in these Bale's Meadows. Turned up a lot of land there for Frank Kincaid, stayed there five years, then they left there and come out here, got a lease from a Bale that was here at Rosehill, come up where we stayed and stayed there five years. And I heard while they lived in the Bale's Meadows on Kincaid's property that they had a kid there, some of them got a snakebite up there by a certain rock up there on the mountain that they call the "hanging rock" and died. And I never did ask them Nichols if they knowed anything about it. Now, that was talk on the mountain there a right smart, I reckon some of them told somebody that, they didn't tell me. But it was so said that they had a kid that got bit up there, I don't know, it was a small kid the best I understood.

INT: Did you have a lot of forest fire trouble up there on the mountain?

INF: Oh, yes, we had several forest fires. Sometimes it would go just a few years and the mountains wouldn't get on fire, sometimes it would be about every year maybe for a few years.

INT: Did all of you get together and fight the fire?

INF: Yeah, that's the way we fought the fire, all of us ganged up together to fight the fire.

INT: Did you ever try to do any control burning to clear the land, maybe for huckleberries or something like that?

INF: You mean fight the fire off on account of the berries or...?

INT: No, I just wondered if you set any fires to clear the land with, to burn off the land off with.

INF: No, no...we didn't set any.

INT: Um-hum, I've heard that a lot of people at one time used to set fires and after a fire had gone over an area, huckleberries would come in pretty thick and wondered if you ever did any of that.

INF: That's right. That's right, I know it is, I'm satisfied it is from experiments about it. But we didn't burn off none for that purpose.

INT: When did you leave the mountain, Mr. Hensley?

INF: Well, '51. 1951.

INT: Well, why did you leave the mountain?

INF: Well, I sold my land up there to the park and everybody else was moving off. They told me I could stay if I wanted to.

INT: Were you the last one to leave?

INF: Well, I stayed there about two years....

INT: Um-hum, by yourself up there.... What caused people to start leaving? Was it buying of the land by the park or did people start to leave even before that?

INF: No, it was buying up by the park what started them to leave. Of course they was people that moved off but the majority of them was just people that didn't own any land.

INT: Well, did the people mind selling their land to the park?

INF: Well, I don't know as I could say they did. They—some of them really wanted to sell maybe some of them really didn't want to sell so much or had rather not sell anyway they sold. Some of them wanted to sell because I know I've heard them talk, they wanted to get off the mountain.

INT: Did you get a fair price for the land? Did everybody get a fair price?

INF: Yeah, they got a pretty fair price.

INT: While the folks were living up there what did they call their community? Now we call it Hensley Settlement today, did you call it Hensley Settlement or?

INF: Yeah, most everybody did.

INT: Most everybody called it Hensley Settlement. Then you think that we're justified in calling it Hensley Settlement today?

INF: Yeah, that's right. That's right, it's been going by that name for a long time. I don't know any other for it.

INT: That would be the best name and there's a fellow told me the other day they couldn't call it anything else by calling it someone's name because those that weren't Hensleys up there were kin to the Hensleys.

INF: Yeah, that's right.

INT: And Hensley Settlement was a good name for it. Mr. Hensley, I've about run out of questions but I'd like for you to just tell us the story of Hensley Settlement as you recall from beginning to end and in this please bring out any activities that come to mind or anything that you would like to mention that you think might be of interest to us and just about anything you could mention would be of primary interest to us.

INF: Well, I'll say this, in a way I guess that my honest opinion that it is good that they sold their land to the park because it was owned by a few individuals and they'd kindly cleared up the best of the land, you know like people commonly do and it was getting worn a right smart and probably they could do better to buy somewhere else. It was unhandy up there anyway. I think the people made a pretty fair deal in selling.

INT: Are there are any experiences or stories that you like to tell us, things that happened to you through the years at the settlement?

INF: Well, I've experienced one thing about it, it's a healthy place alright. It's high and I think it's healthy. I had pretty good health up there and most people did that lived there as far as I know. It's a good place for orchard, it's good fruit country. It was good range country for stock and all like that. I experienced more since I lived there, because when I lived up there with little stock I could keep them in the fields if I wanted to or I could turn them outside and they done as well or maybe a little better. I don't know, might be a few other things if I could think.

INT: Well, if that about winds us up, I certainly want to thank you, Mr. Hensley for helping us and giving us this information, it will be very valuable to us in future work around that area and we want to do it up right.

INF: You're very welcome, glad to help you.

INT: Well, thank you very much.